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ABSTRACT

The performance specifications of furniture and equipment for open education and open-plan schools differ from conventional classroom furniture in that it must be easily moved, have a range of dimensions, contain multipurpose interchangeable components, and be designed to accommodate a variety of student/teacher uses. The author suggests some solutions to specific problems in the areas of seating, work surfaces, and storage and display. Some suggestions are also provided for (1) mobile partitions (to define space), (2) storage (mobile), (3) seating, (4) work surfaces, (5) teacher stations, and (6) play. A related document is EA 004 893. (MLF)

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EQUIPPING THE OPEN-PLAN SCHOOL, EQUIPPING FOR OPEN EDUCATION

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Open education may imply use of a physical concept such as an entire school plant planned and executed to provide the utmost flexibility by literally providing open space and the means to rearrange it according to the educational needs of both students and staff. It may also occur in a school plant of traditional design. Or it may be provided in bite sizes as space is remodelled area by area and as the program develops and staff is trained to utilize the techniques of an open education.

An open education is not merely a place. It involves the characteristics of a place. It is largely a program for, and approach to, learning. It is a psychological climate. It functions with less restriction in physically open areas, but it can function in any building configuration if those who teach and those who administer are willing to plan, prepare and carry out the program accordingly.

An open education is designed to take account of the special needs and capabilities of each student. These needs are many,

EA 001 891

such as the needs to:

1. Be treated and taught as individuals
2. Be active rather than passive in their approach to everything. To gravitate toward active rather than sedentary subjects. (Who says any subject needs to be sedentary?)
3. Be avidly curious, especially when provided with a "filled" environment that is not so structured that it actively prohibits exploration. Note: <u>provide time to explore</u>.
4. Exhibit an enormous range of social, physical, psychological and intellectual capabilities and problems without much reference to the confines of grade standing or age.
5. Establish an identity.
6. Dislike an "institutional" atmosphere.
7. Require freedom-with-guidance.
8. Succeed and know they are succeeding.

Some suggestions for basic techniques for fulfilling these needs follow:

A. The building plan can provide an atmosphere of response to the individual by providing:
as many flexible, open areas as possible;
true flexibility of size and function of space;
forgiving qualities in materials and finishes and beauty.
These components would enable the staff to respond to students' changing needs by altering the environment in an appropriate manner.

B. An atmosphere of response to the individual as reflected in the curriculum might imply developing a perspective about curriculum that makes change and evaluation on-going and by encouraging a curriculum structure which generates participation and ideas from everyone.

C. An atmosphere of response to the individual in relationships between students and adults would be one which enables students to feel that they play a significant part in determining what they learn. This is not to indicate that teachers abdicate their responsibility to facilitate learning, but rather that they examine their central role

of determining when and how to intervene in the student's learning process in order to achieve the main objectives of helping students to learn how to think, to form judgments, and to discriminate.

D. Develop an instructional program which:

Identifies the priorities of learning -- with behavioristic goals clearly and realistically defined -- with the student playing a part in the setting of those goals.

The following equipment suggestions have been specifically designed to meet the demands of open space, but the approach and most of the items suggested will facilitat the concept of the open classroom and open education regardless of the physical limitations of place.

The effectiveness of open space depends upon the richness of materials and experiences that are available within the large space. Enormous variety is required so as to involve children in the process of choice. The disciplined choice and display of materials by the staff should be so arranged that the inherent qualities of it are revealed and the materials themselves act as a point of fascination, excitement and incentive.

The suggested goals of an open education have enormous implications for the development of furniture and equipment lists.

Implications for Equipment

1. A different approach -- Open Ended
2. Non-regimentation in furniture arrangements
3. Availability in a variety of sizes and heights - or adjustability
4. Easily moved -- light-weight
5. Multi-purpose and when possible components should be interchangeable or modular
6. Availability in a variety of textures, colors -- imaginative, stimulating
7. Able to accommodate a variety of student/teacher uses:
    - -- work surface
    - -- storage
    - -- to support educational equipment
    - -- to create easily changed boundaries
8. Able to accommodate a variety of student postures:
    - -- lying
    - -- sitting
    - -- kneeling
    - -- standing

9. Technological devices should be carefully chosen bearing in mind their use in combination with faculty contact -- taking maximum account of individual student needs, interests, learning speeds and styles.

10. Care must be given to placement of equipment distribution points and means of distribution

11. Multi-media capabilities may be required in every area of the school

12. Above all, equipment should facilitate a space a student can dominate, rather than be dominated by.

The variety of group sizes, the variety of work, and the requirement for an elastic use of space demand the constant rearrangement of furniture, and different combination of items. This implies that furniture is the most important means in the teacher s possession for achieving flexibility.

Interest areas can be achieved within a large space by well-conceived placement of permanent equipment together with versatile and easily moved portable equipment.

Generally, all major categories of furniture and equipment (seating, work surfaces, storage, display, play and so forth), in addition to the usual requirements of durability, safety, and employment of educational concepts, should meet the following requirements:

1. Easy mobility --

   Some of today's mobile items are so heavy and/or poorly balanced that the average teacher simply cannot move the piece alone. Why wait on a janitor's schedule?

2. Multi-purpose Use --

   To avoid an overwhelming quantity of things and to conserve space and money. (Minimizing quantity is very important in the open-plan concept since so much is on view in a given space.) Also, as it is desirable to have as many kinds of things on view as possible to stimulate students' imaginations and lead to the exciting atmosphere of virtually unlimited educational resources, it is desirable to limit the quantities of like things.

3. Provide Equipment in an Adequate Range of Dimensions --

   Since a single open area may serve students (who come in a wide variety of sizes due to individual differences and multi-age groupings), care must be given in selection of equipment to see to it that it is available in a wide range of dimensions to avoid the necessity of resorting to a mixture of many different design idioms.

4. Harmony --

What is wanted is a variety of items which, due to the harmony derived from the recognizable dimensional, color and material relationship between all the items, avoids the creation of a patchwork look. This does not imply limitation to a single manufacturer or system, but it does imply care and consideration of design compatability.

We are attempting to arrive at a range of related items of equipment and furniture which can be selected in any combination and be deployed in a multitude of different ways, and yet avoid visual chaos, or the inhibition created by items with unrelated dimension. To achieve this, every single item should share three attributes:

related dimensional system

related color specification

related materials specification

5. Aesthetic Achievement --

Pleasing design concepts, making the item good to look at as well as comfortable to use and functional, are essential.

Areas Where Specific Problems Are Encountered

1. Seating --

Trying to equip an open space accommodating 150 students. with conventional seating for each child will result in approximately 600 legs on the chairs alone, an additional 300 belonging to the students, and an assortment of legs belonging to tables, teachers, and so forth. Most of this forest of legs would be on view most of the time.

The solution to the seating problem need not be universal. Children would presumably prefer a choice -- the carpeted floor, cushions, lounge chairs or sofas, and platforms. These items can serve in association with conventional seating. Homey touches such as a few rocking chairs or fun items such as inflatable plastic or beanbag type chairs or cushions are enjoyed by all.

2. Work Surfaces --

These too should be easily moved and when possible modular. If these items are on wheels, the wheels should be provided with locking brakes. Some thought should be given to coordination of work surfaces with seating design. Items should be available in a wide variety of heights (standing -- lying on

floor) and shapes. Standing heights could accommodate storage below. It should be possible to group these to create large work surfaces or items with different purposes (as components for platform arrangements, for example.) It would be desirable if some work surfaces were designed to accept portable units that would convert them into semi-private areas (study or activity carrels) or actual carrels should be provided. Consideration should be given to easy availability of electricity at these working surfaces, both for use of audio-visual devices as in an autotutorial situation as well as to supplement overhead lighting.

3. Storage and Display --

There are a number of very good items on the general market today that meet most of the design criteria outlined earlier. Mobile clothing storage can present a problem, depending upon the overall climate of your area. Even though many of the storage units available are quite handsome and easily portable, by the time twenty or thirty coats with attendant dripping galoshes and umbrellas have been piled onto them the vision presented, if placed centrally, may not meet a very high aesthetic standard.

Some Equipment Suggestions for Open-Plan/Open Education

1. Mobile Partitions -- to define space

    a. tackboard

    b. projection

    c. chalkboard

    d. free-standing and capable of accepting attachments (shelving, desk tops, etc.)

    e. Ganging and pivotal

2. Storage -- mobile (can also be used to define space)

    a. tote tray cabinet

    b. paper storage

    c. clay

    d. project -- (drying racks)

    e. book

    f. science

    g. periodical

    h. newspaper

    i. records

    j. clothing

    k. costume

    l. toy (bin)

    m. audiovisual

    n. music

3. Seating

a. traditional

b. lounge

c. floor cushions

d. inflatables

e. homey -- rocking chair, overstuffed chair, stool

f. bean-bag

g. carpeting

h. platform units

4. Work Surface

a. traditional desk/chair (inflexible if not separated)

b. tablet arm (rather inflexible)

c. two-student (trapezoid or rectangular)

d. four-student -- round, oblong

e. conference

special conference (listening station,electronic)

f. tote trays with hinged writing surface

g. lap boards

h. platform

i. floor

j. carrel (both study and activity types)

5. Teacher Stations

   a. Movable, free-standing partitions capable of accepting attachments (shelving, desk surface, file units, etc.)

   b. carrels, complete with work-surface lighting, drawers, shelves and files.

6. Play

   a. climbing units

   b. large construction units (for stores, cabins, houses)

   c. water/sand units

   d. wheeled toys with removable "track" that can be placed directly on carpeted surface.

   e. "found" items (inner tubes, ladders, cargo nets, rope)